

Northern Ireland: Apparent suicide and destruction of records mark opening of Billy Wright inquiry

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John Kenneway was found dead in his Northern Ireland prison cell on June 8. Shortly after his death in Maghaberry Prison, the Northern Ireland Prison Service announced its regrets. The Northern Ireland Prison Ombudsman launched an investigation, in line with normal procedures.

Kenneway's death was reportedly suicide, but by an unusual means. According to press reports based on prison sources, prisoner A2544 tied a ligature around his neck and leant back, gradually tightening the noose around his neck, "which is more an act of choking than hanging." A post-mortem concluded that 45-year-old Kenneway, a father of five, had indeed died by his own hand.

There are reasons enough for circumspection.

Kenneway was one of three members of the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) responsible for the 1997 assassination in Northern Ireland's Maze prison of Billy Wright, the loyalist killer and leader of the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF). Kenneway's death, almost completely ignored by the media, occurred within days of the long-awaited full hearings in the public inquiry into Wright's murder, in which long-standing allegations of state collusion in the killing are to be examined.

Kenneway was released under licence in 2000 as part of a scheme agreed under the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, through which those convicted of terrorist offences were freed. He was rearrested in February 2007 by order of Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain, who suspended his licence for "alleged offending behaviour."

Kenneway's family have requested a second post-mortem. Their solicitor also noted that the family is also "concerned about the circumstances in which he was held on a special unit inside the prison."

In a statement to the republican *Andersontown News*, the family accuses the Northern Ireland Prison Service of "breaking" Kenneway by targeted abuse.

Kenneway, who apparently broke relations with the INLA in 2000, was locked up 23 hours a day, for 18 weeks. He was constantly strip-searched, kept awake and not allowed to wash for three-and-a-half weeks. He was denied medication for 10 weeks; family visits and phone calls were disrupted. Early reports of his death suggested it was triggered by the authorities' refusal to allow him to attend a grandchild's christening.

The Ulster edition of the *Mirror* also reported that computer hard drives and video footage had been seized, and prison officers' lockers forced open, in what was described by a prison source as "the most thorough police investigation ever staged inside a prison in Northern

Ireland."

Kenneway's death is not the first associated with the Wright inquiry in Maghaberry Prison. LVF leader Mark Fulton, a close confidant of Wright, died in similar circumstances in 2002. Fulton also strangled himself, while lying on a bed. The death was also attributed to suicide at an inquest, but the inquest verdict was critical of prison warders' failure to record previous attempts by Fulton to take his life.

Jane Winters of British/Irish Rights Watch noted, "There are grounds for concern that two of the potentially most important witnesses who could have given evidence at the Wright inquiry were found dead in very similar circumstances inside Maghaberry prison."

At the time of his death, Kenneway had apparently not spoken to members of the Wright inquiry team, whose head, Lord Maclean, was reported as being keen to interview Kenneway as to how he knew of Wright's movements on the day he was killed.

Concerns around the two deaths have to be seen in the context of the protracted investigations of "collusion" by British security agents and informants into paramilitary murders, on both sides, in Northern Ireland.

Over many years, the British authorities and security forces have resorted to desperate measures to disrupt the exposure of collusion and limit its political fallout. At root, "collusion" is a euphemism for the political assassination of British citizens by agents of their own government.

Billy Wright was assassinated in December 1997 in the Maze prison, a few miles outside Belfast. His murder remains one of the most controversial to take place during the British government's dirty war in Northern Ireland.

Wright was a born-again Christian and leader of the LVF. Formerly a brigade commander in the informant-infested Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), he was suspected of organising scores of sectarian killings, mostly of Catholic civilians. He was widely assumed to be operating with the approval of the British authorities, and was able to carry on his murderous activities with impunity for years.

Wright was expelled from the UVF following the killing of a Catholic taxi driver during the 1996 loyalist Drumcree protests. He had been critical of the UVF for not organising a wave of attacks around the protests. He and around 250 supporters formed the LVF, in opposition to the 1994 loyalist ceasefire, and peace talks that ultimately resulted in the Good Friday Agreement. The UVF threatened to execute him. He was finally jailed in 1997 following threats made against a Catholic woman. Wright requested that bail he had been granted be revoked to offer him greater security in jail.

On December 27, 1997, Wright was shot at least six times and killed by INLA members Christopher McWilliams, John Kenneway and John Glennon, who did not resist arrest and were subsequently convicted of the murder.

The series of security failures and oversights that ultimately led to Wright's death have given rise to the strong suspicion that the British security forces played a role in allowing the INLA hit to take place. A 1998 official report offered no explanation of how the weapons used in the killing were smuggled into the Maze, ostensibly one of the most secure in Europe. Other "lapses" included housing INLA and LVF prisoners in adjacent areas of the same "H Block," the "standing down" of a prison officer placed in a watchtower overlooking the prison on the morning Wright was killed, the INLA's ability to cut a wire fence allowing them access to Wright, and the fact that a strategically located CCTV camera was switched off.

A 2004 report into collusion by Canadian Judge Peter Cory found that the prison authorities knew Wright had already been the target of an INLA murder attempt in Maghaberry Prison earlier in 1997. The authorities were also accused by Cory of turning a "blind eye" to warnings from prison officers that housing the INLA and LVF in proximity would lead to trouble. Cory considered this to be collusion and demanded a full inquiry.

For the British government, Wright's death removed a political obstacle to their ultimately successful efforts to find new working arrangements between Sinn Fein and the pro-British Northern Ireland establishment. In 1997, the *Daily Telegraph* reported Northern Ireland's former chief constable Sir Hugh Annesley saying of Wright, "It's just a question of who gets to the bastard first, us, the IRA or the UVF. You can take your pick."

In the intervening years, both the UVF and the Ulster Defence Association have been torn apart by murderous internal feuds, usually drug related, but in which opponents of the agreement have been ostracised, their operations disrupted and many killed. The LVF, following a campaign by the UVF that killed several people and forced dozens of families to leave East Belfast, finally publicly destroyed their weapons in 2005.

Wright's death is the subject of one of four inquiries into high-profile killings in which British collusion is strongly suspected. Cory also called for inquiries into the loyalist murders of human rights lawyers Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson, and the Catholic worker Robert Hamill. These inquiries are progressing extremely slowly.

The inquiries must also be seen alongside recent revelations over the extent of state foreknowledge of the 1999 Omagh bomb, through the activities of the suspected British agent Patrick Joseph Blair; the exposure of Mark Haddock, a UVF chief and loyalist serial killer, as a police informant; and the exposure of Provisional IRA deputy chief of security Freddie Scappaticci and the organisation's head of international relations, Denis Donaldson, as British agents.

The British authorities were forced to accept some level of public inquiry into the most notorious killings of the war as a concession to Sinn Fein. But the danger is that the exposure of the methods and participants in Northern Ireland's dirty war might go too far.

In addition to the suspicious deaths in Maghaberry prison, numerous previous deaths and attempts to restrict the inquiries through an Inquiries Act, it appears that the security forces have been engaged in systematic efforts to destroy the documentary record.

Preliminary hearings in 2006 for the Wright inquiry, devoted solely to problems associated with the recovery of relevant documents, heard that both intelligence and prison records had been destroyed.

According to two Maghaberry staff, security and prison files on 800 prisoners, including Wright, were destroyed in 2001. The destruction was said to have been ordered by the then Maghaberry governor and former British Army intelligence officer, Martin Mogg. Later evidence contradicted this, saying the files disappeared in 2004. Mogg died in 2005.

Other files went missing in 2004. Security files on two of Wright's killers, an internal report on the murder, whose very existence is controversial, material on the weapon used in the killing along with visitors lists and information on building work carried out on the relevant H Block were destroyed in 2004 as part of a "freedom of information exercise."

In total, 42,000 files in total were destroyed at this time. Even the destruction of these records appears not to have been properly documented.

In April, the *Guardian* reported that both MI5 and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) were demanding the return of secret documents previously handed over to the Stevens inquiry, originally established under John Stevens, recently retired head of the Metropolitan police, in 1989 into collusion allegations.

The Stevens Inquiry has amassed a huge amount of evidence—almost 20 tonnes of documentation—including more than 9,000 statements, 1 million pages of documents, and more than 16,000 seized exhibits. Despite 97 prosecutions, so far the only published report has been a slim document conceding that collusion did indeed take place.

Sources within the inquiry told the *Guardian*, "The first time this stuff will really be out in the public domain will be at the Billy Wright inquiry. This is why the cry from people for their documents to be handed back is getting stronger."

The same edition of the newspaper reported that some of the material handed back to MI5 and the MoD had been immediately shredded. Stevens Inquiry officials have been forced to make copies of the most important secret documents.

When the full Wright inquiry finally opened in May 2007, lawyers for both the Wright family and the inquiry itself complained of delays in providing documents.

Only two weeks ago, the Police Service of Northern Ireland was still providing documents that had initially been requested in 2005. According to inquiry QC Derek Batchelor, other documents about Wright himself had been handed over that were "devoid of information." The Wright inquiry, headed by Lord Ranald Maclean, previously on the Lockerbie team of trial judges, is expected to last many months.



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